The Builder.

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SATURDAY, APRIL 28, 1849.

DRURY-LANE THEATRE was, as usual, crowded to receive the report of the Council of the Art-Union of London, and to distribute the funds, on Tuesday last, the 24th. The Duke of Cambridge, the president, being confined to his room by indisposition, was unable to take the chair, and Lord Monteagle, one of the vice-presidents, had arranged to do so. A summons to attend the Select Committee on the Operation of the Irish Poor Laws, of which his lordship is chairman, and which circumstance was communicated to the council only at the moment for opening the meeting, prevented him, however, from presiding. Under these circumstances, the letters from Lord Monteagle, and Baron Knesebeck on the part of the duke, were read; Mr. Serjeant Thompson, a member of the council, was voted into the chair, and Mr. G. Godwin, the honorary secretary, then read the following

REPORT.

According to annual custom, the council of the Art-Union of London proceed to lay before the subscribers an account of their operations during the past year, the present position of the society, and their views and anticipations for the future. In commencing this report, the thirteenth which the council have had the pleasure to make, they consider it their duty to state the substance and issue of the renewed correspondence with the lords of the Committee of Privy Council for Trade since the date of the last report. It will be remembered that at the general meeting in 1848, the question between the Board of Trade and the council was,—whether the *council* should select the prizes for the prizeholders, or the *prizeholders* select them for themselves, in accordance with the characteristic and foundation law of the association, recognized by Act of Parliament and confirmed by the royal charter, and that the council, strengthened by the unanimous opinion of the meeting, had determined to omit no effort to maintain for the prizeholders this right of choice. In the month of May following, a meeting was called by the Institute of Fine Arts, and a memorial to the Board of Trade, setting forth their opinion that "if the prizes were to be chosen by a committee instead of each prizeholder being at liberty to select for himself, the society would be virtually destroyed," and praying that "the Art-Union of London might be permitted to pursue untrammelled that course which has hitherto been so conducive to the interests of art and artists," was unanimously agreed to. This was afterwards signed by more than 300 artists, including twenty-four royal academicians, and was taken up by a deputation representing the Royal Academy, the Institute of the Fine Arts, the old and new Water Colour Societies, and the Association for Promoting the Free Exhibition of Modern Art.

The Incorporated Society of British Artists had previously, by a separate memorial and deputation, addressed the Board to the same effect.

In July the council were informed, by a communication from Sir Denis Le Marchant, that their lordships proposed to withdraw for the present their requisition that the prizes should be selected by a committee, "and to postpone the question to another year," but that they should require that so long as the right of selection remained absolutely with the prizeholders, they should be allowed to exercise it freely, by such an alteration in the laws as would enable them to give commissions to artists, or to purchase any works excepting portraits, being the productions of a living artist and in his possession at the time the selection was made,—instead of being confined, as now, to the public exhibitions of the year, and that the Board could only consent to withdraw the regulations previously forwarded, on the understanding that such freedom would be secured.

Outlines of proposed new regulations to effect this were forwarded, to enable the council to judge of them more easily.

The council required little consideration to arrive at a conviction of the inexpediency and destructive tendency of the proposed alterations, and a letter was accordingly addressed to the Board of Trade, setting forth their objections, and containing the following passages:—

"The council of the Art-Union of London are anxious, with their lordships, to give to the prizeholder the most perfect freedom of choice, with such limitations only as may be necessary to guard against fraudulent transactions.

The regulations of the society, the result of twelve years' experience and constant attention to the subject on the part of the council, have been made with reference to the prevention of the perversion of the funds to individual advantage, without interference with this freedom of choice desired for the prizeholders.

The regulation binding the prizeholders to select from specified public exhibitions works of which the prices have been recorded, have this end especially in view, and appear to the council to meet the case. The field of selection thus given is large; it has been increased as opportunities occurred (as by the addition of the 'Exhibition of the Royal Commissioners of Fine Arts,' and of the 'Free Exhibition'), while, by the previous record of the price, and the publicity which attends the transaction, the possibility of fraudulent proceedings is rendered very small, if not altogether prevented.

Should the regulation proposed by their lordships be brought into operation, this check would no longer exist, and the opportunities for collusion and improper arrangement would be so greatly increased as to *lead* to these irregularities, and ultimately to destroy the society.

Under the present arrangement, the knowledge that a certain number of pictures must be purchased from the current exhibition serves as a stimulus to artists, which, of course, would no longer exist: the prizes awarded each year are in fact so many premiums for competition open to all artists.

Under the arrangement proposed, private friendship, in the absence even of improper motives, would often lead to the perversion of the funds.

The council are quite unable to reconcile the regulation now suggested by the Board of Trade with the desire expressed by their lordships, in proposing the regulations since withdrawn, to narrow the field of selection so that the choice of the prizeholder *should be confined to works of real merit*.

The authorities of the various bodies of artists exercising a discretion in the admission of pictures, each exhibition has, to a certain extent, the character of *a selection of works of merit*; but if the prizeholder is to be permitted to select any work of art anywhere, provided it is 'the production of a living artist and in his possession at the time,' and, further, to give commissions to last a twelvemonth, if not more, the field of selection will be so widely extended that it would be impossible to embrace it by any sufficient regulations."

Soon afterwards a deputation of the council had an interview with Lord Granville, at the Privy Council office, further to explain the grounds of objection, and the result was, in January last, a letter from Sir Denis Le Marchant, which, after reiterating the opinion of the Board, that either of the courses which they had suggested (opposite enough, it must be confessed), would be preferable to the present system, concluded thus:—

"Their lordships, however, are reluctant, at least at present, to urge their views against the strongly expressed and deliberate sentiments of the committee of the London Art-Union, with whom they have been all along most anxious to co-operate. They have, therefore, directed me to inform you that they shall not now insist upon their proposal, but it must be distinctly understood that they do not relinquish the right of subsequently requiring these, or any other amendments, in the existing system, as circumstances may appear to them to render expedient."

This, then, is the position of the matter at present, and here, it is to be hoped, it will be allowed to rest. As the council have already said to the Board of Trade—Regarding the successful progress of the Art-Union of London as of great national importance, they would view with fear the possibility of a renewal of a discussion which tends to unsettle the public mind in respect of the association, and is greatly opposed to its success, and they feel it to be their duty, therefore, in consequence of the wording of the communication, respectfully but most earnestly to express a hope that their lordships will not again raise a question on which the well-wishers of the society and the great body of English artists and art-lovers have so unanimously and unmistakeably expressed themselves.

An examination of the published reports for several years past will convey to the subscribers some idea of the extent to which the time and attention of the council have been occupied by legal objections and fruitless interference. When Acts of Parliament had removed all doubt as to the legality of the system adopted by the Art-Union of London, and the association had been incorporated by charter, the council anticipated that they would be enabled to apply themselves wholly to the furtherance of its great objects.

They still look forward to this, and deprecate earnestly any renewal of the unnecessary obstructions which have been thrown in the way of their progress.

Before concluding this part of the subject the council would remark that, harassing and injurious as the proceedings in question have been, they were not wholly without advantage, since they served to elicit from various quarters expressions of good will and consideration, very gratifying to those who have the welfare of the association much at heart.

Foremost amongst these expressions they place the communication, that at the meeting of artists at the Institute of Fine Arts in May last, already referred to, it was unanimously resolved,—"That this meeting take this opportunity of expressing the warmest thanks of the body of artists to the Council of the Art-Union of London, convinced that the council have manifested at all times an anxious desire, in the face of many difficulties, to promote the diffusion of a love of art among the people, and the elevation of the position of the artist, and more especially for their disinterested and determined resistance to the measures proposed by the Board of Trade, which would inevitably place in the hands of the council a vast amount of patronage."

Turning now to the financial position of the society,—the council have to report that the total amount subscribed for the current year is 10,391*l.* 17*s.*

The commercial depression which has universally prevailed, political excitement, and the distrust which was for a time produced, have effected seriously all the institutions throughout the country which depend on the co-operation of the public, but have no absolute claim on it. When the council say that the revenue of the Art-Union of London has suffered, it is simply stating, therefore, that this society is not an exception amongst its contemporaries.

Other causes have probably aided in producing the diminution,—the check which was given last year, and the lessening of zeal on the part of some of the numerous voluntary and unpaid co-adjutors, to whose continued exertions, for several years the society owes so much. It is satisfactory to the council to know that no share in the diminution of subscribers can be attributed either to the character of the engraving and illustrated work obtained by each subscriber of the past year, or to delay in issuing them. The "Prisoner of Gisors," and the "Allegro" and "Penseroso" of Milton, which have been distributed, have elicited none but gratifying expressions.

It may be mentioned as a striking illustration of the result of association, that 6*s.* 5*d.* of each subscriber's guinea sufficed to produce these works,—works which if published in the

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